

Purdue Extension Does...Home Fruit Tree Selection

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As winter snow continues to fall around Indiana, the annual flurry of seed and fruit tree catalogs begins in local mailboxes and drop stations. As you select which plants might work best for your family – especially in the area of fruit trees – take some time to consider what might work best not only for taste, but for fruit tree care and maintenance as well.

When choosing a tree for your home orchard, begin with a catalog or nursery with strong, healthy stock. For mail companies, make sure there is a refund guarantee on shipped plants should they arrive with defects or damaged root systems or branches. For local nurseries also check on guarantees, and whether the business must plant the trees to allow an exchange or refund should problems arise.

Select trees for mail delivery or to take home from the store when the weather allows you to plant the tree as soon as possible. This avoids having the tree dry out or become stressed. Check spring frost dates to avoid damage due to cold conditions. NEVER select the “one dollar special” at the end of the year at big box stores, as these frequently are stressed from infrequent/ too frequent watering, heat stress, and being moved or jostled around the store. Remember, it will take most trees three to five years before they might bear fruit, so pay a little more for a strong, healthy tree and leave the “bargains” for the next person.

When selecting trees, you should look at several factors including:

- 1.) Type and use of fruit – Which type of apple, pear, or cherry is best for your family’s needs? Do you need eating apples, or apples for sauce? Check out newer varieties that may have better fruit qualities such as taste, texture, or use than older varieties by purchasing and “taste testing” new varieties found at your local market or grocery store.
- 2.) Harvest time – Do you want all your fruit at once, or over several months? By choosing different varieties of fruit, you can spread out your harvest (and fresh eating) schedule depending on your family’s needs.
- 3.) Space considerations – How large will the tree grow? Although the idea of a large tree full of juicy fruit may sound good at first, when pest management or harvest is considered this may not always be the best choice. By choosing trees grafted onto dwarf (8 – 10 feet tall) or semi-dwarf (12 – 20 feet tall) root stock, homeowners will have an easier time at spraying and harvesting fruit that might be produced by being able to access smaller trees.
- 4.) Disease resistance – Will your tree be able to withstand common disease challenges? If full or partially disease resistant varieties are available, consider purchasing these for

your home. Not all popular varieties are available yet with full resistance, and in some cases the flavors or textures of some fruit types make it worth the extra effort to plant non-resistant trees. Resistant varieties may reduce the number of fungicide sprayings needed for a healthy fruit crop

- 5.) Hardiness – Can your variety survive the local weather? Each state is divided into USDA plant cold hardiness zones to help growers match the correct plants with local weather conditions. Check tree tags and information sheets to insure that your plants will survive when planted.
- 6.) Location – Can your tree grow where you plant it? Most fruit trees prefer well drained soils with adequate year-round moisture (not droughty sands). A tree may survive a few years in a wet location, but stress will eventually cause it to die. Make sure the tree is not placed near obstacles such as power lines, roads, sidewalks, or home foundations where additional problems may eventually develop.
- 7.) Soil tests – Will the tree have the food it needs? Run a soil test for nutrients and pH before planting the tree, and make adjustments so that conditions are right before digging the tree's hole. Do not guess on what is beneath the soil, as most soil tests will provide you with what you have (the actual soil analysis) as well as what you need (fertilizer and lime recommendations).

A home fruit planting can provide fresh, tasty, and nutritious fruit for family use or sale. By following the suggestions listed, you will be more successful while potentially reducing challenges associated with a healthy home orchard.

For additional information on growing fruit at home, check out the free Purdue publication “Midwest Home Fruit Production Guide” (Bulletin 940) at:

https://ag.purdue.edu/hla/pubs/Midwest_Home_Fruit_Production_Guide_940.pdf.

If you would like more information, please contact Purdue Extension – Dubois County at 812-482-1782 or kjeck@purdue.edu.